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A Journal of Anarchist Ideas  
**ANARCHY 23**

SQUATTERS



BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU

A MAN'S AMBITION  
MUST BE SMALL  
TO WRITE HIS NAME  
UPON THIS WALL

DO IT YOURSELF

1984

BETHNAL  
GREEN

HOUSING

on  
the Bomb

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**Correction—Mutual Aid**

In Anarchy 20 we referred to Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* as "long out of print". So it is in Britain, but the American edition of 1955 is available at three dollars (hard-bound) and two dollars (paperback) from Libertarian League, P.O. Box 261, Cooper Station, New York 3, N.Y.

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*In the second half of the twentieth century we have reduced able-bodied fully employed people to homelessness; we never managed this before we decided that housing should be regarded as a social service. In the second half of the twentieth century a man made nearly £3 million profit in seven years from an investment in land of £35,000; no one did quite so well as this before we adopted planning powers. In the second half of the twentieth century the man who gets the greatest State aid with his housing is the owner-occupier millionaire; this was not so in the days of privilege, before we promulgated the Welfare State.*

*Market research can now predict the demand for new products within a few per cent; and we have a slum-clearance programme based on figures that show Welwyn Garden City with the same proportion of unfit houses as Stoke Newington, Cheltenham with the same proportion as Swindon, Carshalton with the same proportion as St. Pancras. The first serious effort to see that the most money goes to the areas in the greatest need has been taken in the 1961 Housing Act; and the Act works in such a way that Bournemouth qualifies for a higher subsidy than Liverpool. The Government has deliberately reduced the building of council houses in the belief that, except in special cases, private enterprise can do the job better; and virtually no private housing is being built for rent.*

## Housing and helplessness

THE DEVASTATING WORDS AT THE HEAD OF THIS PAGE are the opening paragraphs of Mr. Alderson's new Penguin book on housing. The subject has so many aspects that we could easily devote an issue of ANARCHY to each of them: the plight of the homeless in London—living in the LCC's reception centres in conditions which are deliberately degraded in case others should be tempted to join them;<sup>1</sup> the workings of the Rent Act, and the way in which houses which used to be let at working-class rents are now being sold at middle-class freehold prices; land speculation and the boom in office-building and in speculative housing for sale together with the decline in building for rent by local authorities; the farce of slum-clearance and the absurd promises made by a succession of Housing Ministers;<sup>2</sup> the fact that a quarter of a million people in this country now live in caravans; the technical backwardness of the house-building industry;<sup>3</sup> the lowering of housing standards since the hopeful post-war years, to the extent that a government committee declared last year that the ordinary house built today by local authority or speculative developer is obsolete before it is dry.<sup>4</sup>

But the aspect of the housing question which we want to stress is the absence of choice, initiative and freedom, which the ordinary family have in the most elementary and universal human task of finding somewhere to live. The number of houses rented privately is steadily diminishing, and virtually no new housebuilding is for rent. Thus, apart from the horrors of furnished rooms and subletting, there are virtually only two possible ways in which the British family can gain possession of a house or flat: the breadwinner can become an owner-occupier if

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he has the kind of job and income which will enable him to borrow money on mortgage from a building society, or if they are lucky and have the appropriate disabilities, and have been on the Council's list for ages, they can become local authority tenants.

The Economic Council for Europe's analysis *European Housing Trends and Policies* in 1960 showed that houses completed in the United Kingdom in that year could be classified thus: Municipal housing 42.2%, Private unaided building (mostly for owner-occupation) 56.3%, Other (*i.e.*, Housing Associations) 1.5%.

Here are some comparable figures for other countries. *Sweden*: State and local authorities 31.1%, Co-operatives 29.5%, Owner-occupiers 22.2%, Other private development 17.2%. *West Germany*: Public authorities 2.4%, Housing associations and co-operatives 26.1%, Private individuals 63.9%, Private housing companies 4.1%, Other 3.5%. *Czechoslovakia*: State 58.6%, Co-operatives 11.6%, Enterprises 6.4%, Private persons, aided 6.5%, Private persons, unaided 17.0%.

Lewis Waddilove, in his recent PEP report, points out that a range of choice as limited as that in Britain is found only in Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Roumania. The advantages of housing associations or co-operatives, which at present provide an infinitesimal proportion of housing in this country are so obvious compared with the two available alternatives, that we thought it essential, in attempting to look at housing from an anarchist point of view, to include an account of them.

But what is an anarchist point of view? Anarchists are, by definition, opponents of the principle of authority, and as a consequence espouse that of autonomy and free association. If we are powerless over housing it is because we have surrendered our power over everything else, and the first thing we must do is to assert our own initiative. That is why the first two articles in this issue of ANARCHY are on topics which might seem remote from the question of housing. Ian Nairn in his article "Do It Yourself" discusses the manifestation of free and voluntary initiative in two fields where private and state capital has moved out for economic reasons—the rehabilitation of a canal which has been allowed to fall derelict, and the operation of unprofitable branch lines—and draws some general conclusions. Douglas Stuckey in his article on the miners of Brora discusses the application of the same principle to daily work—an exemplar of the syndicalist principle of workers' control (readers who want to pursue this topic further should get copies of ANARCHY 2).

Housing, although it is a basic essential of life, is also "uneconomic" in the sense that there are more profitable investments for private capital, and, in the eyes of the State, higher priorities for public capital. Until we change the whole structure of our society we are always going to have a housing "problem". But are there means of exerting pressure meanwhile, to force at least an alleviation? This is the question that our account of the post-war "squatters' movement" raises. John Morris in a recent article in *Peace News* on "Civil Disobedience 1962" points out that "the history of the last ten or fifteen years abounds with small

local gains, safer road crossings, local amenities, housing improvements, won by what we should now call civil disobedience demonstrations." Can the techniques of civil disobedience and direct action enforce some changes in social priorities in housing? We can only find out by trying them.

The article on the squatters contains a little anarchist fable which is worth thinking about. In citing a contemporary account of the difference, six months later, between the "unofficial" squatters, the people who had the initiative to seize an army camp, and the "official" ones, their neighbours who were moved in by the local authority after the seizure of the camp had been officially recognised, it mentions that only the unofficial squatters "had set to work with a will, improvising partitions, running up curtains, distemping, painting and using initiative."

This brings us to a point which we raised in ANARCHY 4: "One quarter of the population of England and Wales live in the three-and-a-quarter million dwellings owned by local authorities. But is there *one* municipal housing estate in this country in which the tenants have any control over and any responsibility for the administration of their estate, their physical environment?" The point we were trying to make has since been made explicit in Mr. Waddilove's PEP Report on Housing Associations. Citing the experience of Norway, he says:

"A pre-war municipal estate near Oslo was transferred over a period from the ownership of the local authority to the ownership of associations of the tenants themselves. It had been one of the most difficult problems to the local authority; its standards were low, its appearance unpleasant, and there was great resistance to increases in rents to a reasonable level. A series of meetings patiently arranged by the housing manager ultimately resulted in the acceptance by the tenants of membership in co-operatives which, on favourable terms, took over the ownership of the property from the local authority. Today it is transformed. The members have cared for their own property and by corporate action have ensured that others have done so in a way that they failed to do when it was in public ownership; they have charged themselves 'fees for occupation' higher than the rents proposed by the municipality at which they protested so vigorously. This experience so impressed the authority that it decided in principle to transfer all its post-war estates similarly to the ownership of tenant co-operatives and to base its housing policy on this principle."

When are we going to get even the first glimmerings of this kind of freedom and responsibility in this country?

1. See *Homeless!* (Solidarity Pamphlet No 12; 8d. by post from E. Morse, 68 Hill Farm, Whipsnade, nr. Dunstable, Beds).
2. See *But Nothing Happens*, by Ralph Samuel, James Kincaid & Elizabeth Slater (New Left Review, January-April, 1962).
3. See *Are the Architects to Blame?* by Colin Ward (The Twentieth Century, Summer, 1962).
4. See *Homes for Today and Tomorrow* (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, HMSO, 1961).

# Do it yourself

IAN NAIRN

'THE SUM SPENT DURING THE FIRST YEAR—including the purchase of plant and a considerable amount of work under the second year's programme—is well below estimate.' 'The second year's programme began on April 1, but of this, 3½ miles of dredging has already been completed and five lock gates have been installed . . .'

The quotations above do not somehow have the content of an official report or the work of an industrial mammoth. Ahead of schedule with cash in hand is not exactly the motto of Britain in the 1960's. They are in fact from a progress report on the Stratford-on-Avon Canal which, under the National Trust, is being restored by voluntary labour. The canal manager, David Hutchings, is an architect.

A closer look at the workings of this canal repair enterprise reads like a fantasy in these days of supposed apathy and non-co-operation (if the cause is drab or unworthy, then apathy can become almost a virtue). The initial grant of money was £20,000, but the balance had to be made up by public subscription. £26,000 was raised in six months, the best appeal that that National Trust has ever conducted. The cost of opening the canal will be half the official estimate and one-third of the cost of closure. The work has been carried out almost entirely by volunteers and it has included fitting lock gates in bad weather, which is hardly the easiest way to spend a weekend . . . At the end of a year's work, two miles of canal, formerly useless, are open for business or pleasure, and this with an average volunteer force of fifteen. . . .

The same pattern is repeating itself in other ways. Privately run branch railway lines are working at a profit—the fantasy of the Titfield Thunderbolt come true—although the deficit of British Railways mounts every year. One of these branch lines, in Leeds, handles goods traffic and is run by schoolboys. Even in the field of transatlantic air travel, private charter can halve the cost of a journey to America—although most of the world's big airlines are having a job to break even.

But most of the do-it-yourself is an act of love; the profit is incidental. If one symbol of English life is the patient queuer, another is

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IAN NAIRN was born in 1930. It was he who coined the word "Subtopia" in his books *Outrage and Counter-Attack* (about what we are doing to our physical environment) which were originally special numbers of the *Architectural Review*, of which he is assistant editor. We are grateful for permission to reproduce this article from the November issue.

the folly builder, or fanatical enthusiast, or free-thinker. Together they form a polarity, sometimes present in the same person, like those who stay up all night for a seat at Covent Garden. The Covent Garden queue, in fact, unlike the number eleven bus queue, is a kind of collective do-it-yourself. So is CLASP, which in other countries might have been the result of a massive governmental programme, instead of being an almost impromptu affair of local officials pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. The outstanding architectural example is Eric Lyons and his partner who, when they found themselves frustrated by finance, turned half of themselves into a business concern: be-your-own-client. Thank goodness they did.

The English jet engine came about because a Cranwell officer did-it-himself in his spare time; the hovercraft because Mr. Cockerell begun experimenting with holes in tins. Gordon Cullen's development of Townscape has been just as direct, just as unofficial, just as unprofessional. So was Payne Knight's development of Picturesque Theory. So, to an extreme degree, was William Blake both in his writing and his painting. Art history all but breaks down in England because of the persistence of the man who does not depend on X or Y but sits down and thinks or feels it out for himself. The only thing you can do with Vanbrugh is to begin a new chapter in the book. And you don't even know which book it is—architectural history or theatrical history.

It is very odd that where individual enterprise has been made into the cornerstone of Tory political theory, its near neighbour, do-it-yourself, has not been and is not catered for. (The rough distinction I am making is that enterprise is for profit, do-it-yourself is for joy). In fact both left and right seem to be committed all the time to more official do-it-for-you. Everything is slowly becoming more and more professional. Degrees and qualifications are becoming *sine qua non* with the best of intentions but often the worst of results. The amateur can always buy his way in, but we used to have a better tradition than that. At the very time when working conditions are making it possible to have one job for existence and another for joy, the ranks are being closed.

There is here a political force, neither left nor right, of some importance. If the affluent society remains affluent, it may grow to be one of the most important of political factors, using 'political' simply in the sense of a like-minded body of men. Such men are not likely to be attracted to a world of power-enterprise where ICI tries to swallow Courtaulds and Ind Coope succeeds in swallowing Taylor Walker. They are equally unlikely to respond to a falsely egalitarian society where everything is nationalized, everything is bureaucratic and done by the books, and nothing has any joy in it at all.

Yet this is precisely the time when do-it-yourself could take over large sections of the economy, and precisely those sections of the economy which have become unprofitable. Even more precisely, it is just because labour rates have risen that railways, canals and even bus companies can now only make a profit out of their big routes. And

in other terms, it is partly because the borough engineer is understaffed—there's better money elsewhere—that he can no longer show a townscape 'profit'; that is, take the care over details that his nineteenth-century predecessors did.

Theoretically, these two should dovetail perfectly: large-scale services run commercially by large-scale concerns, small-scale services run for the fun of it by enthusiastic amateurs. But for this to happen there needs to be goodwill: and this seems to be lacking among the big bodies whose attitude could sometimes be summed up as: if I can't run this (canal, branch line) at a profit, then nobody else is going to have the chance to either. At Stourbridge, for example, volunteers wanted to clean out a British Railways basin at their own expense; but, instead of being grateful, officialdom sent along two officials who said that 'the surface of the canal must not be broken.' They estimated that the cost of cleaning would be £20,000. It cost the volunteers £74. That's no way to live; but it could be paralleled by similar gestures by councils and council officials all over the country—gestures of a blindness which in its way is worse than downright evil.

If each of the big organizations who had things running at a loss would set up a small clearing-house to aid private taking-over instead of giving it what is at best grudging acceptance, the eventual saving would be enormous. Abandonment of a canal, for example, costs £10,000 a mile; abandonment of a railway must cost something comparable. If concerted action were started now, then many of the unprofitable lines need never close at all. All they would lose would be their bureaucratic chains. The converse, of course, is that trunk services need to be run by a highly centralized and highly organized authority—which could also profit by losing its bureaucratic chains.

All that has been said about railways and canals could apply to town planning, which has been a favourite hunting-ground of do-it-yourself ever since the folly and the improver; but nowadays in England it is sewn up so rigidly that the consultant town planner is out of a job.

So, suppose that the trunk town planning services—integrating roads and towns, given a push to the north to balance the drift to the south—were run by a central body, the missing Ministry of Planning; then, at the other end of the scale, as the organic counterpart of this, do-it-yourself could come into its own. There is no real reason why the residents of a particular street should not have the lampstandards of their choice, if they are prepared to pay the extra cost. There are plenty of specious reasons, and the number and variety of these that I have met personally would astonish a Stalinist commissar; we make such a fearful botch of trying to live together. Footpaths, walls, hedges, signs and planting could all be decided by local option, a street or an urban unit at a time. It would not be anarchy\* but the principle of freedom of parts within a guiding pattern which makes up the only worthwhile discipline that has ever been invented.

\*We think it would be: or at least we hope so!—Editor, ANARCHY.

Government bodies and systems propose; human nature disposes. If freedom of parts is not given willingly then sooner or later, by biological laws, *homo sapiens* will take it. The contemptuous kick that Albert Finney gave towards the new council house at the end of the film of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* represents an immense sum of energy, coiled up and stored. Give it some freedom, freedom to really concern itself with the environment, and it will not be abused, because in this respect the English are deeply civilized, though every year bureaucratic obstruction whittles down the inherited store of good nature and fair play. Bottle it up, lard every worthwhile thing round with regulations and restrictive practices, make the qualification system watertight, insist on the union card and the rate for the job, adhere rigidly to the bye-laws, and forbid all deviations; then the whole thing will explode in our silly faces.

## Miners who run their own pit

DOUGLAS STUCKEY

YOU PROBABLY KNOW THAT THE ANARCHO-SYNDICALISTS in Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War successfully took over the operation of the tramways and other public services. Records of this episode are fairly exhaustive. Now even the US Embassy Information Service deals tenderly with experiments in decentralised workers' management—when they are in Yugoslavia. But what about practical industrial democracy in this country to day? The general view seems to be that the idea died with Ben Tillett and Tom Mann, or, at least, with the demise of the Guild Socialist movement. "Workers control" is generally an exercise in theory by esoteric left-wing groups since the unions refused or were denied participation in the management of nationalised industry.

Our press and broadcasting services have given some faint praise to the sporadic and tentative attempts by workers to control their own destinies. "Tonight" will lay on a bluff and not unsympathetic visit to a firm like Scott Bader, but the whole conception of workers' control is treated as an amiable aberration outside the real stuff of politics. Where successful it is an amusing "jeu d'esprit"; where a failure there is wise shaking of heads at the understandable but pathetic foolishness of those who cannot recognise economic realities.

Some of the failures could well have been successes. At Cumllynfell, the anthracite mine which was closed by the NCB under a "rationalisation" (sic) plan, was the economic life of an entire remote community in South Wales. Here the people were freeholders of their homes and lived a rich social life in the traditional Welsh pattern.

DOUGLAS STUCKEY is the treasurer of Demintry, the Society for Democratic Integration in Industry.

Their reaction to the threatened closure was that they should run the pit themselves. This was no pipe-dream—Dutch importers were prepared to take the whole of the output of the colliery at the pit-head in the area, and the local union officials showed some enterprise in their attempts to achieve their aim. Needless to say, the Coal Board and the Labour Party showed distinct antipathy to the scheme, and as the National Coal Board has authority to control all mines employing more than thirty workers the miners lost their fight.

More recent and happier is the story of Brora. Brora lies on the east coast of Sutherland, just north of Dunrobin, the former private railway station of the Dukes who take that county's name. It is the only colliery north of the Tay and possibly the oldest mine in the Commonwealth. Here the owning company fell on bad times and went into liquidation. Here, too, closure would have meant depopulation and social stagnation, but fortunately there were men about with an empirical approach prepared to look at the miners' proposals on their merits. Bruce Weir, of the *Northern Times* at Golspie, approached the voluntary Highland Fund on their behalf, and John Rollo, Chairman of the Fund, immediately visited the colliery and recommended the setting up of a sub-committee to examine the problem.

The Highland Fund agreed to help. A new company, Highland Colliery Ltd., was formed to be operated on behalf of the miners, with three directors from the mine and three from the Fund (the latter to remain during the period in which the Fund's money was on loan). Interest on the loan, three per cent, is a first charge on the profits. Each miner takes up two 5s. shares in the company each week by deduction from his wages. Remaining profits are divisible among miners and staff and in due course the mine will be theirs.

On October, 17, 1961, the colliery buildings and briquetting plant reopened after negotiations with the liquidator and the National Coal Board. The output, two tons per man per shift, is entirely consumed in the locality and a viable livelihood has been restored for the workers and their dependants to a total of about 150 people.

These are small examples in an obsolescent industry; as well as these, Kentish colliers, miners in Northumberland, Scottish railway men, chemical workers and others have at different times during the last few years tried to run their own show.

A tithe of the energy and imagination which is devoted to phoney by-elections could produce permanent advances in industrial democracy. There are plenty of attempts by CND and others to garner support for the peace movement among industrial workers. It would be a big step forward if workers for peace could be induced to support efforts to achieve industrial democracy.

The opposition from the managerial establishment should not be underestimated. Their view is the same as that of the Secretary to the nineteenth century Congress at Aix who, in reply to some enlightened proposals by Robert Owen, expostulated: "But we do not want the mass to be wealthy *and* independent: how could we control them if they were?"

## Direct action for houses: the story of the squatters

Asses, swine, have litter spread,  
And with fitting food are fed,  
All things have a home but one,—  
Thou, Oh Englishman hast none!

—SHELLEY: *The Mask of Anarchy*.



THE POLITICIANS OF THE POST-WAR LABOUR GOVERNMENT, who were taken by surprise by the "Squatters' Movement" which swept Britain (and other countries), in 1946, showed, by their astonishment and unpreparedness, how far out of touch they were with the desperateness of the housing situation, and with the mood of the people. They were blind to the evidence provided by the earlier seizures of empty buildings by homeless returning servicemen which occurred in 1919, or by the Scottish examples during the 1939-1945 war—the "Blitz Hotel" incident in Glasgow, and the occupation of empty houses at Blantyre in the spring of 1945. Above all, they ignored the lessons of the Vigilante campaign of the summer of 1945—that far-off summer which saw the beginning of the "peace", and of the atomic age.

The picturesque, but perhaps ill-advised name of "Vigilantes" was adopted by committees largely composed of ex-servicemen, who, under cover of night, installed homeless families and their furniture in unoccupied houses—usually successfully since no action could be taken to evict them once they were in, until the usually absentee property-owners could initiate legal proceedings against them. This campaign started, and was most active, in seaside towns, for example Southend, Hastings, and, most of all, Brighton, which has a rather unique place among the South Coast resorts, in that it has a large working-class population. The original and outstanding grievance against which the Vigilante campaign was aimed, was the way in which big seaside houses were being kept empty for most of the year in order to be let a very high rents during the short holiday season.

From this, as the movement spread, it became an attack on the right of landlords to keep property unoccupied for any reason. The success of the Vigilantes forced the government to grant wider powers to local authorities to requisition property for housing purposes, while the threat of further direct action ensured that the councils would use these powers. Thus the campaign began with an effort to put

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*The author of this account witnessed and assisted the occupation of army camps by squatters in the summer of 1946.*

right an obvious public scandal, it spread to become a challenge to the hitherto hardly disputed right of the landlord to do as he liked with his property without reference to public needs, and it ended with the official sanction of this challenge.

The squatters' movement of the following year sprang from another of these scandalous anomalies—the emptiness of hundreds of army and air force camps during the worst housing shortage we have known. The first of the 1946 squatters was Mr. James Fielding, a cinema projectionist at Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire, who, desperate for somewhere to live, moved on May 8th with his family, into the former officers' mess of an unoccupied anti-aircraft camp. As soon as the news of their action got around the town, other young couples in a similar predicament moved into the other huts, and the first colony of squatters was born. Shortly afterwards two other camps in the same area were seized, and this was followed by the occupation of several camps around Sheffield. The Sheffield settlers formed a Squatters' Protection Society and quickly linked up with the pioneer squatters at Scunthorpe.

These events were rapidly followed by the seizure of hundreds of camps in every part of Britain. The authorities who at first disclaimed any responsibility for the squatters—passing the buck from one department to another—were forced into recognising the occupations, and local councils were instructed to turn on water and electricity and provide essential services. Later in the year the Ministry of Works, which had previously declared itself “not interested”, found it possible to offer the Ministry of Health (which was then the government department responsible for housing) 850 former service camps.

The government announced on 11th October, 1946 that 1,038 camps in England and Wales had been occupied by 39,535 people, and on 5th September it was stated that four thousand people had squatted in Scotland.

Since the government could not destroy the movement, it tried to absorb it, and expressed itself confident that the settlers would “see reason” and “move out when the situation had been explained to them.” A leading article in *The Observer* commented:

The Ministry piously hopes that squatters, after certain explanations, will ‘return to the homes from which they have come.’ What homes? Bits of caravans or crannies in the over-crowded lodgings or the premises of others from which they are desperately trying to escape? The fact that ex-soldiers who have had plenty of camp life in their time should now regard an army hut as a little bit of heaven is surely strong enough evidence of their misery and despair. Nor are they likely to be terrified by the talk of winter weather.

As the camps began to fill, the squatters turned to other empty buildings: houses, shops, mansions, disused school buildings, race tracks and a stadium, were among the places occupied, and on August 26, two Aberdeen hotels and a hostel were taken, while on the 29th two big hotels in Glasgow were seized, though they had to be abandoned later.

The final, and most spectacular phase of the campaign began in London on Sunday the 8th September, when the 148 luxury flats of Duchess of Bedford House, Kensington, another block in Weymouth

Street, Marylebone, and houses in Holland Park and Campden Hill, were invaded. On the following day three more houses in Beaumont Street, Marylebone were taken over, and on Tuesday 60 families entered Fountain Court, a block of flats in Victoria. On Wednesday the flats at Abbey Lodge, Regents Park and the 630-roomed Ivanhoe Hotel, Bloomsbury, were occupied.

The tactics adopted by the police in this final stage of the campaign varied from day to day. At first, at the Duchess of Bedford House, their human sympathy seems to have got the better of their role as protectors of the interests of the propertied class, and, according to the press, “Police called to the scene made themselves helpful and an inspector arranged for a W.V.S. van to supply hot drinks.” But on the Tuesday, they were organising a watch on unoccupied property to prevent further squatting, and the Home Office instructed Scotland Yard to “inquire into the origin of the organisation behind the squatters” and to keep the government “fully informed of the activities of political agitators who foment trouble.” (Needless to say, the CID soon announced “secret documents”). On the Wednesday, after Abbey Lodge and the Ivanhoe Hotel had been seized, the police cordoned the buildings. Their refusal to allow any more than twenty-five blankets into Abbey Lodge for the children, caused a scene outside in which demonstrators lay down five-deep in the road and held up traffic for a quarter of a mile. Later, food and blankets were allowed in.

There were similar scenes at the Ivanhoe Hotel. The state of siege was resumed during the night at the four main “squatters’ fronts” and the blockade continued on the following day, while the police took more action to prevent people from entering or re-entering the buildings. The same scenes were repeated on the Thursday night, and mounted police were used to disperse the crowd at Abbey Lodge. On Friday there were rumours that they intended to use tear-gas. Police leave was stopped, and the route to the Sunday meeting in Hyde Park was lined with mounted police. The first arrests, apart from the usual ones on charges of obstruction and insulting behaviour, were made on the Saturday, when five Communists were charged with “conspiring together with other persons to incite persons to trespass on property.” (They were subsequently found guilty and bound over).

On the same day, the Minister of Health, the late Aneurin Bevan, who was just back from his holiday in Switzerland, instructed all local authorities to cut off gas and electricity supplies to all property under their control occupied by squatters. The Labour government advised all owners of empty buildings to ensure that all doors and windows were secured, but it did not ask them why, at a time when families were being prosecuted for sleeping in fields and ditches, their property remained empty.

The Communists, although a year earlier they had denounced the Vigilantes, were very active amongst the squatters in London. So much so that people who had to rely on newspapers for their information assumed, and have assumed since, that the whole thing was a

Communist stunt. Diana Murray Hill, the only person to make a serious study at the time of who the squatters were and what kind of straits they had been in (*Pilot Papers*, November 1946), reported from Abbey Lodge that "as to the argument that the Communists gave them the idea of squatting, they said there was nothing to it. Many of them had been squatting of their own accord before the taking over of the flats. In some cases the huts they had been squatting in had been taken away from them." And, "Finally the crowd of sympathisers outside, the majority of whom Mr. R. knew personally and could vouch for their not being Communists . . ." and of the squatters themselves: "Again he knew many of them personally, and of the ones he knew none were Communists. The squatters formed their own committee."

Or as we put it in *FREEDOM* (21/9/46):

"The fact is that the Communists wish to exploit the movement now that it has become widespread. One must recognise this fact even when one expresses sympathy for the arrested leaders, and solidarity with those rank and file Communists who have given genuine support to some squatters. Nevertheless the support of the Communists is a real danger to the movement. Legal action against the squatters was obviously very difficult; but the attempt of the CP to organise them has provided the government with just the handle they needed. The legal prosecutions will deflect attention from the real issue—the desperate plight of the homeless. It will lower the whole question to the level of political strife and opportunism. Perhaps most dangerous of all, the CP themselves will seek to turn the movement into legalistic channels. They have already formulated 'demands' of the government. Soon they will be urging the homeless to avoid further direct action and "do nothing to hamper the realisation of your demands".

The truth of this evaluation was shown in the anti-climax of the "general evacuation" by the London squatters when the High Court injunction was granted. This was treated by the press as the end of the squatters, and the fact was concealed that the many thousands of camp settlers were not affected by the set-back, and had settled down until they could find something better, while many of the London squatters were eventually provided with accommodation of one sort or another by the LCC.

In October, Aneurin Bevan sought to turn public feeling against the camp squatters by suggesting that they were "jumping their place in the housing queue", when in fact they were jumping out of the housing queue by moving into buildings which would not otherwise have been used for housing purposes. It took most of them years in fact to get into the "housing queue". Over a hundred families who in 1946 occupied a camp known as Field Farm in Oxfordshire, stayed together and in 1958-9 were rehoused in the new village of Berinsfield on the same site.

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A notable feature of the whole campaign was the way in which, quite spontaneously and without disputes, the accommodation was divided among the would-be squatters in accordance with their needs, the size of their families, and so on. The best huts and buildings, usually the former Officers' Mess, needless to say, went to large

families, while the ordinary Nissen huts were divided among the childless couples. Of one of the earliest squatters' camps, it was reported on 24/7/46.

The campers today discovered a 20,000-gallon water tank and have turned on the water. A youth, appointed as water inspector, is carrying out hourly checks to ensure that taps are not left running. A camp committee has been elected and the camp is being run on communal lines. Tradesmen call with their vans.

In camps I visited in Hampshire I found everywhere that hopeful, adventurous spirit that springs from independence and spontaneous co-operation. Everywhere I saw attempts to make those bleak huts look "more like home". Communal cooking, laundering and nursery facilities sprang up. Fathers took turns to stoke the boilers, mothers took turns to do the settlement's shopping, and the children collected up the rubbish left by the army and made bonfires of it. For them at least, it was a real adventure. Squatters Protection Societies and Federations were formed to protect their mutual interest. Some memorable scenes of solidarity were seen during the seizures at London hotels, when, in the face of police opposition, complete strangers threw into the buildings blankets and parcels of food, without hope of recompense.

One of the remarkable features of the squatters' communities was that they were formed from people who had very little in common except their homelessness—tinkers and university dons were amongst them. A very revealing report on the squatters, in the series "How Are They Now?" appeared in the *News Chronicle* for January 14th, 1947. The correspondent describes a camp in Lancashire:

" . . . There are two camps within the camp—the official squatters (that is, people who have been placed in the huts after the first invasion) and the unofficial squatters (the veterans, who have been allowed to remain on sufferance).

"Both pay the same rent of 10s. a week—but there the similarity ends. Although one would have imagined that the acceptance of rent from both should accord them identical privileges, in fact, it does not. Workmen have put up partitions in the huts of the official squatters—and have put in sinks and other numerous conveniences. These are the sheep; the goats have perforce to fend for themselves.

"An interesting commentary on the situation was made by one of the young welfare officers attached to the housing department. On her visit of inspection she found that the goats had set to work with a will, improvising partitions, running up curtains, distempering, painting and using initiative.

The official squatters, on the other hand, sat about glumly without using initiative or lifting a hand to help themselves and bemoaning their fate, even though they might have been removed from the most appalling slum property. Until the overworked corporation workmen got around to them they would not attempt to improve affairs themselves."

How much this story reveals, not only about the squatters, but about the difference between the state of mind that induces free independent action, and that of dependence and inertia: the difference between people who initiate things and act for themselves, and the people to whom things just happen.

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When the squatters' movement is viewed against other historical examples of direct action applied to the housing problem in a non-revolutionary situation, four definite phases, common to them all, can be discerned. Firstly, *Initiative*, the individual action that begins the campaign, the spark that starts the blaze; secondly, *Consolidation*, when the movement spreads sufficiently to constitute a real threat to property rights and becomes big enough to avoid being simply snuffed out by the authorities. The third phase is that of *Success*, when the authorities have to concede to the movement what it has won; and the fourth phase is that of *Official Action*, usually undertaken unwillingly in order to placate the popular demand, of which the direct action has been the most effective weapon, and to avoid further attacks on the interests of the propertied class. For nothing succeeds like success, and governments usually realize that, as Kropotkin observes, "Once the principle of the 'Divine Right of Property' is shaken, no amount of theorising will prevent its overthrow".

The first phase was seen in Glasgow in 1915 when the Govan housewives refused to pay the rent increases demanded by rapacious landlords, while Partick women rough-handled the rent-collectors; it was seen in Vienna in 1921 when homeless ex-soldiers seized land in the ex-Emperor's hunting park, and began to build houses; it was to be seen again in 1938 when 250 tenants of Quinn Square, Bethnal Green refused to pay any more rent until repairs were done and rents reduced; it was seen in Brighton in June 1945, when ex-servicemen moved a homeless family into a house in Round Hill Street, and thus began the Vigilante campaign; and it was seen in May 1946, when the Fielding family initiated the Squatters by settling in the Scunthorpe camp.

The second phase was represented by the great demonstration of housewives in George Square during the Clydeside Rent Strikes, and the strike of the shipyard workers who passed a resolution that "unless the government took action to reduce rents to their pre-war level, a general strike on the Clyde would follow". In Vienna it was the formation of the Land Settlement Movement whose banners were inscribed with the words: "Give us Land, Wood and Stone, and we will make Bread!" In the London Rent Strike Movement, this phase was apparent in the development of the Stepney Tenants' League and the spread of rent strikes all over the London area; in the Vigilante campaign it took the form of widespread occupation of empty apartments and among the squatters it was still more noticeable in the seizure of service camps in every part of this country.

The third phase was implicit in the Glasgow Sheriff Court's decision in favour of 18 workers summoned for non-payment of rent, after a deputation had pointed out to the Sheriff that: "These men will only resume work in the event of your deciding against the factor if you do not, it means that the workers on the lower reaches will stop work tomorrow and join them". It was seen in the Vienna Municipality's recognition of the Co-operative building clubs; and it took a very obvious form in the rent strikes before the last war when the landlord

of Brady Street, Stepney, had to agree to big rent reductions, and to repairs costing £2,500 for one year and £1,000 for each year afterwards, or when, in the Municipal Tenants' Strike in Birmingham, 15,000 people got rent reductions amounting to £30,000 a year. The official sanctioning of the first wave of camp squatters was the latest example of this phase.

In the final phase we see the complete justification of direct action as a means of forcing the authorities to take radical measures that they would not otherwise have considered. Fearing further big strikes on the Clyde, in the First World War, a government completely representing the landlord class, was forced to pass the first Rent Restrictions Act, and, remembering this, and with the 1938-9 rent strikes fresh in their minds, Chamberlain's government hastened to introduce the 1939 Rent Restrictions Act on the outbreak of the Second World War. The militant action of the Austrian workers made it necessary for the authorities, at a time of complete economic and financial collapse, to initiate the Vienna Municipal Housing and Town-Planning Scheme, one of the biggest and most comprehensive in Europe. In 1945 the Vigilantes coerced the government into granting local authorities wide requisitioning powers and the threat of further action made sure that they used them. In the same way, the announcement that "Eight hundred and fifty former service camps are being offered by the Ministry of Works to Mr. Aneurin Bevan to help him in his emergency housing drive", was the measure of the success of the camp squatters. But for the opportunist intervention of the Communists, it seems likely that the seizure of hotels and luxury flats would have forced even more significant and spectacular concessions from the authorities.

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Today, direct action is again overdue. Isn't it extraordinary that in a period where homelessness in London has been building up steadily, State House in Holborn, one of the vast new prestige office blocks should have stood empty for at least two years? In the new Solidarity pamphlet, *Homelessness!*, Sheila Jones of the Tenants' Association at one of the LCC's "half-way houses" says,

To some of us it is beginning to be clear that if we want anything done we will have to do it ourselves. The LCC tries to keep these places as terrible as possible to prevent others taking advantage of the 'facilities' provided. An imaginative and selective breaking of the artificial LCC rules might be an effective method of protest. What would happen for instance if a group of families got together and decided to bring in their own furniture to replace the LCC stuff? Would the LCC wardens call the police in . . . against tenants whose only crime was that they had tried, at their own expense, to make living conditions more bearable for themselves and for their children?

And another contributor, Ken Jones points out that there are possibilities for the unfortunate occupants of the reception centres who have literally nothing to lose. He suggests for example that husbands should disobey the "curfew", so that if the authorities dare, they must use force to separate a man from his family.

But must the homeless and dispirited be left to fight their own battles?

## We built our own houses

HARRY DEVERSON

THERE CAN BE FEW MORE SATISFACTORY SENSATIONS IN LIFE than sitting back in the house you built for yourself, and your satisfaction is not diminished by that fact that forty neighbours helped you build your house, because you also helped them build theirs. The "Self-Build" movement, like Harry Cowley's Vigilante campaign that preceded it, and a lot of other good things, was started by a group of ex-servicemen in Brighton in 1949, though it was closely followed by the Tallington Road scheme at Sheldon. Today there are at least twenty-five self-build housing societies around Brighton. It is hard to say how many there are in the whole country, as societies frequently wind up on completing their scheme, but it is estimated that since 1949 about six thousand houses have been built by three hundred societies.

The first thing to do is to find a group of reliable friends—to build up a number between ten and fifty. The more building tradesmen there are among them, the easier life is going to be. The next thing is to get in touch with the National Federation of Housing Societies for their literature and advice, and the third and hardest thing is to find a bit of land, checking with the local authority, who *may* help you find it, that it is land on which you are likely to get planning permission to build houses. The Federation will advise you on how to become a Friendly Society—or a limited company if that appeals to you, in order to qualify collectively for a mortgage loan from the local council or from a building society. You will find that you need to build up a lump sum to pay registration fees and so on, and to form a building fund with about £50 per member to pay a deposit on the land, and to maintain an Expenses Fund.

According to the kind of skills you have among your members already, you will have to get instruction in the building trades, you will have to get an architect—you might get one as a member, and you will need someone who is competent to do the paper work and keep the books. You will all have to be determined to work in the evenings and weekends for two years or so to get the scheme built: a minimum of sixteen hours a week per man, and you will have to be willing to go on working on other people's houses after your own is finished.

And you will have to work out a priority list to decide who moves in first.

It's hard, but it's not impossible. Thousands of people have done it. What do you get for all the effort? You get a house, for less than half the cost of one on the open market. The plan can be varied to suit your own requirements. You get good neighbours who are likely to be friends for life. I know because I live in a house that we built together.

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## What hope for housing societies?

TRISTRAM SHANDY

WHEN BUILDING SOCIETIES FIRST CAME INTO EXISTENCE as organs of working-class mutual aid at the end of the eighteenth century, they were remarkably like the self-build housing societies of today, and very unlike the money-lending-plus-savings-bank organisations which are the modern building societies. They consisted of groups of people who saved to buy land to house themselves and, when the first house was completed, borrowed money on its security to build another until the whole society was housed, when they disbanded. They changed their character in the nineteenth century to become permanent societies separating the people who wished to save from those who wished to build.

A new kind of society was founded in 1830, the Labourers' Friendly Society, which also changed in 1844 to become the Society for Improving the Conditions of the Labouring Classes. But the early efforts of people to improve their own housing conditions failed to expand for lack of capital. Investors then, as now, found easier ways of getting rich quick than by financing working-class housing. This is where the Victorian philanthropists moved in, satisfied with a "modest return" on their capital.

The housing society movement since then has never lost this "charitable" emphasis, and in this respect is in marked contrast with the co-operative housing associations of other countries, for instance, Sweden, whose achievements are enthusiastically described in Lewis Waddilove's recent PEP report *Housing Associations*. There, the movement

depended strongly on the initiative of tenants; it did not, as in the United Kingdom, become the instrument of liberal employers and philan-

thropists making provision for what were referred to as the "working classes". The tenants' unions of Sweden discovered that the best way to prevent the making of undue profits from a housing shortage and to raise housing standards was to build and administer their own homes. As an example, in 1923, the tenants' union of Stockholm became the Tenants' Savings and Building Society and in the following year similar movements in other towns came together to form a National Association of Housing Societies known throughout Sweden by the initials HSB . . . A second national body for housing associations has been formed by the trade unions in Sweden concerned with the building industry. HSB remains the largest national body and its very name measures out the difference between the Swedish and the British housing association movement. In Sweden the movement's inspiration and drive come from the tenants; they save for the purpose of raising their own housing standards.

In Britain the initiative in the movement has come from philanthropists and others concerned to raise the housing standards of the "working class". Save in the "self-build" societies, little initiative rests with the occupants of the houses who are simply the tenants of the association.

The visitor to housing estates on the Continent comments most often on the attraction of their lay-out, the care with which common land is cultivated, and the harmony of external decoration. The claim of the co-operative association is that it combines the sense of ownership and the security of tenure of the owner-occupied house with an equally strong sense of responsibility for, and interest in, the neighbourhood as a whole. Moreover it does this as a by-product of its normal organisation; in Britain in new estates we have attempted to achieve the same result by all kinds of artificial stimuli to neighbourhood responsibility.

He describes how the HSB has built up not only resources of expert advice in building, planning and finance, "but has become a centre of research the results of which can immediately be applied in its own large-scale activities. This means that the tiniest housing co-operative in a remote township" has access to the best of advice, architectural and technical, with the result that "the standards of design, workmanship and finish are well in advance of comparable dwellings in this country . . . So competent is the research, technical and even manufacturing organisation of HSB that municipalities have been glad to avail themselves of it. Many local authority housing schemes are in fact planned and executed by HSB; in some areas municipal houses are built and managed by a 'municipal company' on the directorate of which the local authority and HSB are represented."

In Britain the nearest thing we have to the HSB is the National Federation of Housing Societies, which at the end of December 1961 had 679 affiliated societies consisting of 229 societies for providing general family housing, 244 societies providing old peoples housing, 83 for industrial housing (sponsored by industrial concerns for their employees) and 123 self-build societies. Associations affiliated to the National Federation own 105,000 houses, which is less than one per cent. of the present stock of houses in England and Wales.

Housing societies may borrow money on the same terms as local authorities (they usually do it *through* local authorities) at the current rate of interest charged by the Public Works Loan Board—at present something over six per cent, and they qualify for any subsidies which are available to local authorities (these have been whittled down by the

present government so that in practice subsidies are only paid for old people's housing, slum clearance and "overspill").

All political parties express their support of the housing society idea, and their enthusiasm for co-operative housing societies, and a very great deal has been heard about the provision of £25 million under Section 7 of the Housing Act of 1961, for direct government loans (at the current rate of interest) to housing societies for building new dwellings which are to be kept available for cost rent letting, without subsidy. It is notorious too, that only five societies have actually succeeded in getting any of this money.

The Minister of Housing describes his twenty-five million as a "pump-priming" operation, meaning that he wants to encourage private capital to go the same way. This is of course the same pious hope that was expressed by the philanthropists a hundred years ago, and it will be equally unsuccessful today. But why has he had so few takers anyway for his present loan which is expected to build 7,000 houses?

In the first place, since it is designed to provide for the letting at cost rents of houses costing (with land) about £3,500, which means that the tenant, to meet his obligations would have to be earning £1,500 a year. But the average in this country is £15 7s. a week. In the second place, because of the system of taxation and tax allowances, a man earning enough to rent one of these houses will find other forms of householding a better proposition. This was pointed out with surprising figures in the PEP report and the point is underlined by J. F. Roper of Manchester University in a letter to the *Guardian* (26/9/62):

Although the possibility of housing associations borrowing over a period of 40-60 years enables them to charge lower gross rents than the mortgage repayment of an owner-occupier with a 20-year building society mortgage, this advantage is more than offset in most cases by the effects of taxation. As the law stands at present, while the owner-occupier can claim tax relief for the interest portion of his mortgage repayment the housing association cannot . . . This allowance means that assuming enough tax was paid at the standard rate, the net payment will be higher for the housing association tenant than for the owner-occupier, who will in any case have acquired after 20 years a marketable asset. This situation will become more anomalous

The National Federation of Housing Societies, 12 Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, London, SW1, (Telephone: WHItEhall 1692-4), publish a half-crown pamphlet "A guide to the formation, constitution and purpose of Housing Associations", and a sixpenny leaflet "Self-Build Housing Associations". Among their other publications are "Model Rules" for housing societies of all kinds—charitable, general family housing, industrial housing, self-build, tenant co-operative and 'cost-rent' societies.

The P.E.P. Report "Housing Associations" costs 4s. from Political and Economic Planning, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London, SW1.

if the abolition of Schedule A taxation for owner-occupiers, which has been promised by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is not extended to non-profit housing associations.

Unless the law is changed it will be impossible for co-operative housing to succeed in this country, as it has in Scandinavia, in providing an additional solution to our housing problems.

Here we have the crux of the matter. But there is a third reason. The whole damn thing is so hard to understand! In spite of the outstanding effort, on a limited budget, by the National Federation, we have made a simple thing like housing, so complicated, that only experts can unravel it. For this reason the only people likely to be able to make use of the £25 millions are likely to be offshoots of existing societies which have the know-how, to overcome the difficulties in getting the correct legal and architectural advice and above all, in getting sites. "You cannot get the loan without the site and you cannot get the site without proving that you have the money."

But leaving aside the Minister's addled egg, there are advantages in attempting, here and now, to form tenants' co-operatives on the Scandinavian pattern. (A housing co-operative can be defined as a group of tenants who have pooled their limited capital resources and pledged their collective credit-worthiness to purchase an estate of houses or flats or both which they then own, manage and control jointly). As Harry Moncrieff of Co-operative Planning Limited, put it at last summer's AGM of the National Federation:

The biggest opportunity for tenants' co-operatives in this country is in the big cities, such as London, in building flats . . . A great number of people are purchasing flats today which are being built by development companies. In these developments there are three profits: the profit on the land, the builder's profit and the developer's profit. You cannot do anything about the first two but under tenants' co-operatives you do save the developer's profit . . . (which) is £500 to £1,000 per dwelling in the South of England. A tenants' co-operative can build flats in London at between £500 and £1,000 per flat less than private enterprise is selling them at today. This is of real financial benefit. This is equal to a saving of 30s. per week, and plus the benefit of being able to buy it over sixty years you can get a house which is £2 a week less. This makes it possible for an entirely different stratum of the income group to have a home.

There are already several successful housing co-operatives, owned, managed and controlled by their tenants. The oldest is the Dronfield Pioneer Health and Housing Society, started in 1946, under the inspiration of the Peckham Experiment at a town between Sheffield and Chesterfield. There are the Adys Lawn Tenants' Association and the Rutland Park Gardens Association in Willesden, and the Regent's Park Housing Society in St. Pancras. Housing Partnership Limited after their original success at Wimbledon (it took them three years to find a site) have formed a new association on a cost-rent basis which has actually got the first slice of the Ministry's money.

At least these pioneers have demonstrated that it is possible to find a more rational and satisfying system of organising housing than any of the very limited range of methods we are used to.

## Bethnal Green: a museum of housing

COLIN WARD

THE PREFABS I HAD COME TO SEE IN BETHNAL GREEN were put up a month ago by the London County Council on some of the pockets of land awaiting re-development, as a stop-gap measure because of the manifest failure of housing to keep pace with employment in London. The idea is that when the site is permanently re-developed, in, say, five years, the house is picked up and moved elsewhere. (Not with the tenants in: they are expected to have been found accommodation by then).

Compared with the prefabs of the immediate post-war years, they struck me as the product of a joinery shop rather than of an aircraft factory. They are better looking, better heated and insulated, but very much smaller. They look like kiosks at the entrance to an exhibition, or like classrooms which have somehow become detached from a new primary school. The real problems of prefabrication—as a means of providing more homes more quickly and at a lower cost are not touched upon here. But that was not the intention. If you were homeless you would regard one as heaven; if you were a housing manager you would see them as a confession of failure.

Within a stone's throw of the new prefabs I saw some of the old prefabs of 1946, which, some of you may remember, were supposed to have a life of ten years. They are still there, in the little gardens which the tenants have planted around them. "No, I don't want to leave it for one of those flats," one of the tenants told me. And she brought me face to face with the endless argument about Bethnal Green, in which normally unemotional words like dog, rabbit-hutch, backyard and parlour, are ranged against phrases like "sea of asphalt", "inhuman scale", "sanitary desert" and so on. The new prefabs are simply the latest, temporary exhibit in what is not only a sociologist's zoo, but an architectural museum. It's all there, every mean or patronising or sentimental or brutal or humane assumption about the housing needs of the urban working class.

And as I wandered through these streets I could see the argument documented in a hundred years of rehousing. The oldest exhibit,

Baroness Burdett-Coutts' Columbia Square housing, completed exactly a hundred years ago, is being demolished at this moment. Grim, with gothic trimmings, nobody mourns it, except perhaps members of the Victorian Society—who never had to live there. The Baroness, a banking heiress with Charles Dickens as her mentor, set out to replace a squalid slum called Nova Scotia Gardens with model workmen's tenements. "You cannot fail to be struck," Dickens told her, "by the consideration that if large buildings had been erected for the working people, instead of the absurd and expensive separate walnut shells in which they live, London would have been about one-third of its present size." Her architect, H. A. Darbishire, believed in healthy draughts, and ensured that a high wind blew from the central staircases set in huge open arches, through the wide access gallery running the length of the five-storey blocks. Darbishire went on to build the adjacent and far more sumptuous Columbia Market, for which a use could never be found, as well as the first of the Peabody Trust's Buildings—Columbia Square was lavish compared with *them*.

Every Liverpool Street commuter knows the next exhibit, the endless parallel blocks of the Improved Industrial Dwellings, where Alderman Waterlow expected a net return of six per cent on his philanthropic capital. Ninety years later, after the successful direct action of the tenants last year—a rent strike and spectacular demonstrations, the Minister confirmed a compulsory purchase order on the grounds that the rents which have been progressively increased in the last few years "are exorbitant for what the tenants are getting or seem likely to get." Millicent Rose once remarked that the chief architectural feature of these blocks is the galvanised iron tub hanging on a nail outside every scullery window, revealing that there is not a single bathroom in the place.

Nor for that matter were bathrooms provided in any of the London County Council's own flats until after the First World War. But when we turn to the Boundary Road Estate, the first great slum clearance scheme of the infant LCC in the eighteen-nineties, we are in a different world from that of either the Baroness or the Alderman. It replaced a notorious slum—the Jago of Arthur Morrison's novel, where one child in four died in infancy. Short, tree-lined avenues radiate from a central circus with a bandstand in the middle, and laundries, workshops and sheds for coster-mongers' barrows were included. Several young architects in the LCC's newly-formed department worked on the scheme, each doing one section—which explains the unforced variety of the estate. They were influenced by the socialism of William Morris and by its architectural expression in the work of Philip Webb, though they handled the vernacular idiom more freely and unselfconsciously than their master. These buildings, with their romantic skyline and lovingly-handled durable detailing, have weathered well, and today in their autumnal severity, stand out like the same architects' Millbank and Webber Row estates in other parts of London, as some of the finest work of their period. The architectural verve and warmth of

feeling towards the people who were to live in the new flats did not survive long in the LCC architect's department, which did not recover that spirit until the nineteen-fifties.

The blocks of flats of the interwar years whether the mechanical neo-Georgian of the LCC with its heavy brick access balconies, or the even more nondescript work of the Bethnal Green Borough Council, seems windswept, institutional and faceless. I walked past rows and rows of such blocks before suddenly coming upon the Borough Council's recent "cluster" block in Claredale Street. The architect, Denys Lasdun has sought here to provide vertically for that horizontal matey neighbourliness which we have been taught to associate with the tight little terraces of old Bethnal Green—freed now from the stigma of slumdom by the depopulation of the borough. (130,00 people lived there in 1901. By 1919 this had fallen to 68,000; in 1951, 58,000 and in 1955, 54,000). "Dilapidated but cozy, damp but friendly," observed Young and Wilmott, "in the eyes of most Bethnal Greeners these cottages *are* the place, much more so than the huge blocks of tenement buildings standing guard, like dark fortresses, over the little houses." I could not decide, on the strength of a casual visit, whether Mr. Lasdun's experiment was a dark fortress or a vertical street. He hoped, by bringing the short wings of this block (which cluster around a central core containing lifts and services), within talking distance of each other to reduce the isolation which many tenants of the new flats complain of. A survey by Willmott and Cooney suggests that he has not really succeeded in this aim, but at least he hasn't pursued it at the expense of anyone's privacy. He *has* contrived to make a very large tall building conceal its bulk and maintain the scale of its surroundings.

The external surfaces of this building are of unclad concrete, straight from the shuttering, even in the entrance, where the children have chalked nuclear disarmament signs, "Kevin loves Sheila" and so on. Personally I am nearly as fond as Jack Robinson of writings on walls, and I adhere to the architectural philosophy suggested to me by Giancarlo de Carlo, that the occupants of our buildings must "attack" them, to make them their own. *I* like the scribbles, but do the tenants? It's hard to get chalk off rough concrete anyway. Has Mr. Lasdun misjudged the mood of Bethnal Green, where—in Nelson Street under the shadow of one of the less appetising LCC blocks, one householder has painted the entire elevation of his two-storey house green, with every mortar joint picked out in white, or where in Teesdale Road, whose three-storey houses are built in those hard red shiny bricks from the Midlands, another has set to work to make them even redder and shinier by painting them a glossy maroon?

Hasn't, in fact, the New Brutalism come at just the wrong moment to a Bethnal Green where the celebrated Mums have begun to read the gracious living magazines, where the girls all look like Helen Shapiro, and the children in their blazers exercise their poodles—unless they live in the dogless flats?

My fewest misgivings in Bethnal Green were when I saw some of the recent work of the LCC architects. The Avebury Estate in Gosset Street, for example—a mixture of high and low buildings. Here, in a gesture of neighbourly recognition, the entrance to Lygon House frames a vista of some of the mid-nineteenth century terraces. Lorden Walk, a low staggered terrace of gabled cottages, pays homage—rather fussily—to an earlier urban tradition. Eversley House actually has sculpture outside. Better, perhaps, architecturally, are their very latest jobs like the little square carved out of Elsworth Street, where the detailing is robust and quite free from municipal gentility.

What the cluster blocks and the latest LCC work have in common is that they have turned their back on the mechanical repetitive geometry of layout which characterises almost all the older re-development in the borough.

After a hundred years of rehousing in this battered East London borough we are still just learning how to do it. We know what the problem is. How to provide high density urban housing which has that particular kind of amenity and intimacy and shelteredness that people persist in associating with the word *home*. Any citizen of Bethnal Green will tell you that in different words. A few architects can show you how to do it. The LCC architects themselves are attempting it in their experimental housing now being built in Angrave Street, Shoreditch.

Most architects can tell you that the principle obstacles are not technical or aesthetic or even financial, but are simply the restrictions imposed by building byelaws and regulations. In their reaction against squalor, overcrowding and poor ventilation, the architects of the old tenements prescribed howling gales for their tenants deliberately. Today we provide draughty access balconies way up in the air, absent-mindedly, and pretend that draughts don't exist. We have to build high and wide-apart, because the regulations don't allow us to build compactly even when we build low. Is it surprising that, given our climate, the word that sums up what the old Bethnal Green has and most of the new Bethnal Green hasn't is . . . "domesticity".

## A man's ambition must be small . . .

**JACK ROBINSON**

IT IS SAID THAT IN THE REMAINS OF POMPEII, devastated by a volcano, there remains an inscription written in chalk on the wall. It may be that after some future cataclysm (man-made) all that will remain of mankind is a short four letter word chalked on a wall.

The tendency to use chalk is generally confined to children, which must be mimicry of the teacher's chalking on the blackboard. The inscriptions of professed love; whether by wooer, wooed or of an interested third party will never be known, such are the convolutions of infantile passions. PAUL LOVES JANET. HE KISSED HER AT PLAYTIME: was this written (in a drawn picture-frame outside Parsons Green tube station) by Paul, Janet, or a jealous rival? The long lines along walls, following round corners, to finish with the single, vile, daring epithet FOOL! still has its charm, but where is the arrow of the "chalky chase"? Has hopscotch become more simple, or is it just that the sophisticated South does not play "Journey to London" with its compulsive patternings?

The other site for *graffiti* is well-known as the English Protestant's confessional. It is an oft-quoted but obscure remark that one of the effects of the Education Act was to make the writing on the lavatory walls higher. This is a mere sneer at popular education, but the content and form of such contributions varies little. There was, at the Tate Gallery, a collection of nude studies (in the Gents) all labelled with the appropriate artist's name. Nevertheless, "*A man's ambition must be small/To write his name on a shithouse wall.*"

The groping assertion of the self by the infant who has just learnt that he exists, is the same blind impulse that makes the yahoo carve his name upon the ancient monument or the cultured Etonian carve his name on the desk. "If you would see my monuments look around" or, in the American phrase KILROY WAS HERE.

It is common to find in prisons (see *Gate Fever*) the same grasping

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*JACK ROBINSON, born Birmingham 1913, left school at 14. Educated Winson Green, Shrewsbury and Wormwood Scrubs 1941-2. Has been rent-collector, factory worker, human guinea-pig, epileptic colony attendant. A second-hand bookseller by trade, he has worked with Freedom Bookshop since 1951. He is an editor of FREEDOM and compiles the column 'Out of this World' under one of his pseudonyms.*

for an identity that every day's experience of the institute seeks to erode away. Names and sentences are commonly pricked out on the floorboards, generally away from the eagle eye of the screws. The variant couplet "*A man's ambition must be small/To write his name on a prison wall*" is often found there too.

On other occasions of infantile regression the cult of writing on the walls breaks out. Elections are no longer what they used to be, but SEND THE BLACKS BACK; JUDAIC NICKEL (on the Mint); BAN THE BOMB; KEEP THE BOMB; KEEP BRITAIN WHITE, or, short and simple: JEW FILM (on a poster for the *King of Kings*), and NIGS, equivocally and badly written, supply the artillery in a war of chalk and crayon. Worst of all are the slogans written in paint referring to past events: NO WAR, or ALL OUT—MAY DAY, that give permanence to the impermanent, like the odd long-dry WET PAINT or the note on Hungerford Bridge of an appointment with a painter that was kept (or missed) years ago. Political passions are such that these slogans, when chalked, rarely last. A VOTE FOR JOE SOAP remained in an Holborn Alley for years, but that may be just further proof of its obscurity, and hence impotence.

*Graffiti* tends to be in the decline as an art-form, or even as literature. Mild outbreaks of paranoia—DETECTIVE FLEMING TO THE RIVER—made Holborn walls more interesting a few years ago, but it is only lately that a prolific, versatile and original talent has taken up the chalk to add a new dimension to the writings on the wall.

The author is, of course, anonymous; it will take literary scholars some time to track him down. His canvas (as it were) is the London street walls from Fulham Broadway, with deviations down Brompton Road, Kings Road, Sloane Street, Piccadilly, Park Lane, and wide divergencies to Bedford Avenue, Orange Street, Hand Court, St. Giles Circus; and his work may have been authentic at Clapham Junction (this is the freshest piece discovered, a simple insertion of the dates 1914 and 1939 outside a cinema showing *War of the Worlds*—if Mr. Chalk has an obsession besides the pun, it is dates).

This obsession with dates ranges from 1913 CHALK FARM to '1951' Sloane Street. No earlier dates have been discovered, but all this work is provisional as items are erased and probably much more material remains to be discovered.

A provisional hypothesis is that Mr. Chalk is writing his biography (HIS-STORY in his own words) in a succession of brief comments written *en passant* upon walls. It may be that the buildings have definite associations with actual events, but this is a secret that only Mr. Chalk knows.

As a child of our time (probably born 1913) he has known war, poverty, persecution, sickness, death; and his sermon on stone echoes the unhappy lot of man. Through it all he has retained a distinctive handwriting, a flair for puns and puzzles and a cynical contempt for institutions. One is reminded of the tortuous explorations of Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.

The childish wonder at the tricks works play is reflected in OH-RANGE=GRATE (Orange Street); 1914 A-RIVALL (probably birthdate

of a brother or sister); 1914-1939 HAND-DEAD DOWN (Hand Court); 1945 WAR ENDEAD P.O.W.—WOW (this "dead" ending is his favourite pun); IN-JURY 1945 MINUS NEIN (outside a church); ARM(S) and ALM(S) reminding one of entries for a 'Bullets' competition.

The obscurity of some of the puns, ASS-TUTE; Y CATHOLIC WHORE RINGS; or PEN=SPELL'S PEN takes some reflecting upon, but as with the Koans, as I believe they are called, handed down by the Zen masters, reflection may reveal some hidden truth in what seems nonsense.

From twenty-eight inscriptions there are several absolutely incomprehensible ones, for example DEBTRYMENTELL, or 9LOVER EXTENDED AND SHAKE (this may be the preliminaries to a boxing-match); DE-SAN(I), or BREAK HER WILL (in Park Lane). They range from the simple 1919 HERE (Brompton Hospital) to the complex C.I.D. written beneath a mosaic in St. Giles Circus. The description of the mosaic of a picture by C. F. Watts reads *Time and Death walk hand in hand followed by Judgment who with hidden eyes (? erased in original) holds the scales*. The word C.I.D. is emphasised with an arrow pointing to the mosaic. Minor mysteries are the meaning of DARDANELLES 1918, or 1913 WAR? 1939 INTELLIGENCE? The minor pun 1933 AWK-WARD AUK BIRD (by Chelsea Football Ground) is probably pure *jeu de mot*, but 1918-1939 HIP-NOT-TISED is self-explanatory.

The saga of Mr. Chalk is doubtless unfinished. Some may think his works the ravings of a madman, but never has such a medium been used to such self-satisfying effect. We may think his ambition puny but there is a coda to the verse:—

*A Man's ambition must be small  
To write his name upon a wall  
But smaller still are those who scrawl  
Their names in blood on history's wall.*

*A year ago I wrote in THE OBSERVER about the homeless families in London. A fortnight later the BBC T.V. programme "Panorama" took up the story. Soon representatives of most newspapers were to be seen clamouring round the austere cast-iron gates of Newington Lodge, gates which were reputed to open only for ambulances and for taxis arriving to deposit the homeless with their suitcases and brown paper parcels.*

*There was a national outcry. A year later I have been back to Newington Lodge to see what had come of this outcry.*

*I found little changed.*

—JEREMY SANDFORD "London's Homeless Revisited",  
(Observer 23/9/62).

In military schools the main purpose of camp life was evidently military drill, which we all disliked very much, but the dullness of which was occasionally relieved by making us take part in manoeuvres . . .

With the coming of darkness, the booming of the guns, the rattling of the cavalry, we boys grew very much excited, and when Alexander ordered a charge our column charged straight upon him. Tightly packed in our ranks, with lowered bayonets, we must have had a menacing aspect; and I saw the Emperor, who was still on foot, clearing the way for the column in three formidable jumps. I understood then the meaning of a column which marches in serried ranks under the excitement of the music and the march itself. There stood before us the Emperor, our commander, whom we all venerated; but I felt that in this moving mass not one page or cadet would have moved an inch aside or stopped to make room for him.

"Why should he be in our way?" the pages said afterwards.

Boys, rifle in hand, are even more terrible in such cases than old soldiers.

KROPOTKIN, "Memoirs of a Revolutionist".

## JOHN RAE AND THE MYTHS OF WAR

### Arthur Uloth

THE FANATICISM OF BOY-SOLDIERS, or would be soldiers, is described by John Rae in his novel *The Custard Boys*, which has recently appeared as a film, with the title *Reach for Glory*. He has also attacked the indoctrination of children with military ideas in a radio talk in August last year, which has now been published by the Friends' Peace Committee as a pamphlet, *Children and the Myths of War*.\*

He believes that the myths of war are three: "first, that violence was not only justified but laudable; second, that war was fun, a great game; and third, that physical courage was the finest virtue and that moral courage, as shown by the conscientious objector, for example, was contemptible . . .".

Film, book and talk all put across the same message. The book seems to me the least satisfactory of the three. It is written in the modern style in which the prevailing tone is one of despair and disgust. Well, life is pretty terrible, but not that bad. It is not merely that some of the characters, some of the situations, some of the actions that take place are bad. Everything is awful. The sun in the sky resembles a severed head. The lino on the floor is compared to vomit. Only

\**The Custard Boys* (Ace Books, 2s. 6d.)

*Children and the Myths of War* (Friends Peace Committee, Friends House, NW1, 6d.)

*Reach for Glory* (Columbia Pictures, distributed by Gala). Directed by Philip Leacock and completed in 1961 but not exhibited until November, 1962 when it opened at the Gala-Royal Cinema, Edgware Road.

to people in deep states of melancholia does the world appear like this. It is no more a portrait of reality than it would be if everything was shown as sweetness and light.

The disadvantages of this style is that when disasters do happen they no longer have the power to shock. In this twilight all cats are grey.

The film follows the book pretty closely in plot, but less closely in style. Of course there are changes, and there have, as in any film, to be some omissions. However the film seems to me to get the point across much better. This is a real East Anglian town we are shown, not the landscape of nightmare.

The story concerns a gang of boys, evacuated to the country, some with their parents, in the Second World War. Some of the boys are almost grown up, others are children still. They are borned and eager to grow up so that they too can fight. They are desperately afraid that the war will end before they are old enough to. In the meantime they occupy themselves with manly sports, like hunting cats, chasing them on their bicycles across the countryside and into the sea. They fight and beat up other boys, and seek all the time to display their manliness, as they understand it.

In this they are aided and abetted by the entire adult world. Films show deeds of heroism. The parson preaches fire-eating sermons from the safety of his pulpit. The fathers stick pins in wall-maps, in order to mark the daily movements of the armies, as given out by the radio. The mothers, like the women in barbaric hordes, urge their menfolk onwards to the fray—although in a very genteel and English manner. The headmaster compels his pupils to join the school cadet corps, where the boys are taught the care of the rifle, and how to shoot with it.

The hero of the story is one of the younger members of the gang. His position is precarious because his brother (here the plot of book and film diverge somewhat) is really a "conchie". His parents conceal it from the village, pretending that their elder son is in the army. Actually, released from prison, he comes to visit his parents, and says that he is going to be an ambulance driver. One would have thought that a hard, responsible and sometimes dangerous job such as this would have satisfied anybody. But in the hysterical mood of wartime it does not satisfy his family. His visit, which takes place after dark, so that the neighbours may not know, is one of the bravest acts of the film, for father, mother, and younger brothers, though deeply divided on everything else, all unite to reject him, each in their own way, with varying degrees of hatefulness.

Then in addition to all this the young boy has another burden placed on his shoulders. At the beginning of the new term the headmaster puts him in charge of a boy who has just arrived at the school. This new boy is an Austrian Jewish refugee. He is far more attractive in every way than the English children, and is more grown-up also. Naturally the other members of the gang are outraged. However the little Austrian ends by winning a grudging acceptance.

The leader of the gang is a youth of terrifying fanaticism. He lives

for war, and has accepted the standards that the adult world seems to be upholding with none of the mental reservations that adults allow themselves. He stirs up a quarrel with a gang of local toughs, farmers' boys who are nearly adult and have female camp followers of great viciousness trailing around behind them.

An ambush for these local boys is planned, but the little Jew, too sensitive to take kindly to this sort of thing, runs away at the critical moment. The local boys see him and are not taken by surprise, and their greater maturity and strength gains the day.

The culprit has to be punished according to military law, and a mock execution is staged, with rifles from the cadet corps armoury. Unfortunately a live round goes into one of the guns, by mistake for a blank, and the boy is killed.

At first the gang tries to make out that it was an accident, but this soon gives way to defiance. The leader of the gang, when asked why he had shot at the boy, replies.

"In war all cowards are shot."

"But this isn't a war."

"What the hell is it, then? If it isn't a war, why are we wearing these uniforms? Why do we have to spend three afternoons a week learning the parts of the rifle? If they don't want us to use the bloody thing, why do they teach us how to?"

This is of course unanswerable, and the film concludes with the boys, on the way to the police station, becoming mixed up with a loyal and patriotic crowd, who have turned out to welcome the home-coming of a local man who has just won the V.C. Ironically he is going to marry the sister of the boy who actually fired the fatal shot.

*Children and the Myths of War* repeats the argument. John Rae believes that children are enthusiastic for war because they have been taught to believe it is a high adventure. He makes the point that cannibalism, which our ancestors accepted as normal enough, has now become taboo. No one, not even Hitler, could make men eat each other again. There is no glory in cannibalism. But war, which is closely connected with cannibalism, head-hunting and ritual murder, has retained its glamour. Still if one barbaric rite can be done away with so can another. This is his essential point.

It is a good argument as far as it goes. He realises that the violence of war and the violence of society as a whole are linked.

"During the war a generation grew up in a world that glorified violence and it was inevitable that some of that generation should have become violent themselves; they used knives and razors instead of bayonets and flame-throwers, but the result was usually the same. And today if a young thug kills an old woman it is because killing is still an accepted method of solving problems: you need some money so you bash an old lady on the head; you need law and order so you hang a few murderers; you need the Canal so you shoot a few Egyptians; you need national independence so you are prepared to drop a bomb that will kill a quarter of a million people, all of whom will be no more deserving of death than the old woman. I do not believe that you

can separate the different forms of killing, state-owned and private enterprise. Where one breeds, so will the other; when it comes to reproducing itself, violence can compete with the amoeba."

But when it comes to the point all he can suggest is a World No-Killing Year, on the lines of World Refugee Year. No doubt this would be a good idea. Pacifists would all get busy. There would be announcements in *Peace News*, and we should go around distributing leaflets as usual. The public would never hear of it, except for the small minority which is interested in good causes.

The truth is surely that war, unlike cannibalism, is an integral part of authoritarian society, if only because no authority (except the moral kind) can be enforced without the possibility of ultimate appeal to violence. If a man refuses to pay a parking fine he can ultimately be arrested, or have his goods distrained. If he refuses to submit to either, but barricades himself in his house with a shotgun, first the police and ultimately the military can be called in, fully equipped with the latest modern weapons. Of course this never happens, the punishment is too trivial to be worth such a stand, but in the background the threat of it is always there.

A World No-State Year, or a World Freedom Year, in which large numbers of people passively resisted every aspect of authoritarian society that bore upon their lives (not that it is at all likely to happen, alas!) would achieve more publicity, and would have the same effect as a No-Killing Year, for apart from hunting and crime, the only killing done nowadays is at the behest of the state.

By all means let us do all in our power to counter the cult of war and violence which is thrust upon children. I do not think that the situation in this field is as hopeless as is often supposed. It is a popular saying that "children are little savages", but there are degrees of savagery, and there are plenty of children who detest real violence, and avoid it as much as they can. Instead of being made to feel ashamed of themselves as they are today they should be encouraged to develop their non-violent attitudes. The cruelty of children is always "news", like the man who bit the dog. The kindness of children is forgotten. It can never be the basis of a sensational novel or a dramatic film, so it tends to get overlooked. The children who dislike violence are our potential allies.

And there are of course different sorts of violence as well. There is a world of difference between the situation where a small boy rushes into the kitchen with a toy pistol and shouts, "Bang! Bang! Mummy you're dead. You must lie on the floor", and the situation where the same little boy, a couple of years later is put into barrack-like conditions and made to do drill. The one situation is a play situation, the other is serious. In the first case the little boy knows at heart that it is a game. In the second the dividing line between play and reality has become dangerously blurred, to say the least of it. We are already in the world of reality, and the guns may have real bullets in them, as in the film. The violence in the first situation is no more than an outlet for childhood's energy. In the second it is violence under discipline,

violence stimulated and at the same time kept in check, to be released at the appropriate moment and directed in accordance with the rulers' desires, as one directs the water through a hose.

Again, it would surely be wrong to make children feel guilty, as is sometimes done, about getting angry, punching their parents or throwing things about. And surely there is too a certain degree of legitimate self-defensive violence? One does not have to submit to being knocked about or bullied in the interests of world peace. Nor should children who enjoy games of war, cowboys, indians, pirates and so forth be made to feel abnormal in some way, just as those who do not like these games are made to feel abnormal in present society. (Actually those children who most delight in such games are by no means always those who become most militaristically-minded in after life. Here again one needs to distinguish between the "bang-bang" sort of violence, the "friendly wrestle" sort of violence and the real savage, hurtful kind of fighting. A child may not care for all three. A taste for the first and second does not imply necessarily a taste for the third).\*

But to teach children the truth about war, about the horror, futility and ingloriousness of it, is not enough. The logic of authoritarian society demands armies and war. It is no good encouraging constructive interests, as opposed to warlike ones, if the children are eventually going to be whisked away by conscription, or whatever the modern equivalent will be in the "exciting" new age of rocket-bombs and push-buttons. The children will have to learn the origins of war. They will have to learn that society is unjust, to its very foundations. They will have to learn that our economic and social arrangements cause war, and that, if war is to be abolished, these must be done away with and new ones substituted.

A. S. Neill says that in his school, Summerhill, the children are not taught to be pacifists. And very few pacifists, and even rebels, come from his school. In this I am a supporter of Francisco Ferrer, who ran a free school in Spain before the First World War. He taught the children the truth about society as he saw it, and so dangerous was he considered that the Spanish government, at the instigation of the Church, put him to death on a trumped-up charge.

In this matter neutrality is merely to side with the authoritarians. It is impossible not to teach the children something about the world one lives in. I am not now necessarily thinking only of the classroom but of the home as well. Parents and their friends can hardly stop discussing The Bomb, etc., simply because the children are present and must be protected from the danger of being influenced by their elders until "they are old enough to decide for themselves". Whatever one does the children will have a political education, and let it be, as John Rae desires, an anti-war one, and as Ferrer wanted, an anti-authoritarian one, at the same time.

\*A whole article could be devoted to the different sorts and degrees of violence among children and adults, to the kinds that are harmless, or even healthy, and the kinds that are not. It is a large and complicated subject that I have hardly ever seen discussed.

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